DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 409 CS 215 325

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TITLE Cultivating Multicultural Sensitivity through Children's Literature.
PUB DATE 19 Nov 95
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (85th, San Diego, CA, November 16-21, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; International Cooperation; *Multicultural Education
IDENTIFIERS Commonality; *Cultural Sensitivity; *International Board on Books for Young People

ABSTRACT

Before teachers can help children break down stereotypes, they must develop an awareness of their own attitudes and learn to recognize when and how children's literature can build knowledge about other cultures and promote awareness of one's attitudes towards others. The 24th International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) Congress held in Spain promoted a sense of equality and community; all those who attended had common needs, problems, and things to celebrate. Speakers at the Congress made it clear that two challenges face the school teacher today: book selection and attitude changing. The first challenge can be met, in part, by encouraging book translations from English to other languages and from other languages to English. Rich literature is available from such countries and regions as Estonia, Japan, and South America--the United States does not have a monopoly on children's literature. Teachers have an obligation to pick books for their children to read that promote open, accepting attitudes of all people, regardless of race or nationality. (TB)

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ED 397 409

NCTE CONVENTION - SAN DIEGO November 19, 1995

# CULTIVATING MULTICULTURAL SENSITIVITY THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Before teachers can help children break down stereotypes, they must develop awareness of their own attitudes and learn to recognize when and how children's literature can build knowledge about other cultures and promote awareness of one's attitude towards others. Literacy educators are working tirelessly in many countries at presenting quality literature to promotes acceptance of diversity for their own society and for neighboring countries. This presentation recounts anecdotes and reports from representatives at the 24th International IBBY Congress.

## Promoting Global Understanding

Walter Wangerin (1994), in *The Crying for a Vision*, uses the world of the Lakotas as the controlling metaphor for his powerful saga of a young man seeking to know himself. Wangerin spent many years studying this culture at its strongest, proudest period and has sought to commemorate that glory by reproducing its history and tradition as accurately as possible in his novel.

He writes in the preface that when the Lakota People speak of their nation, they say *oyate icke*, meaning "*the real people*, that first, wild, native race which stands between sky and earth, linking the two." In consequence, all other races are *oyate unma, the other-people*, grouped by the single fact that they are not Lakota. So there is pride in the title. *Oyate icke: the Lakota are ankatu*, Distinct. Superior. Representing the purest of humankind.

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However, Wangerin experienced a warm welcome when he spent several summers within the tribe near Rosebud, South Dakota. He writes:

> The welcome with which non-Indians were received is largely due to a man named Elmer Running. He is the *wichasha wakan* who leads the Sun Dance. Years ago he saw in a vision all races and all peoples dancing in the same Sacred Circle. With great courage he acted upon his vision. The private conviction became a public gift, and thus the *oyate icke* have invited *oyate unma* into [an equal] relationship. It has not been easy. Such changes are never easy. But Elmer Running is a brave man and a prophet (p.vii).

At the 24th congress of the International Board of Books for Young People in Seville, Spain only forty-two of the 400 people in attendance were from the United States and Canada. I wish all of you could have experienced those five days in that international community. The main impression that I received was the strong realization that all the countries of the world represented there were interacting as equals--all with common needs, achievements, problems, celebrations.

In America I feel that all toooften we look on with a sense of superiority --"helping other countries"--treating them all as though they were third world countries, or at least, less than our country in status, that we are the *oyate icke*. I came away from there feeling deeply that attitudes must change in America, and that leaders in teacher education can help make those changes. I believe that only by changing attitudes, by changing the heads and the hearts of our prospective teachers can true multicultural sensitivity and a sense of equality become the legacy of American school children.

In the IBBY plenary lecture, Carmen Diane Dearden (1994) from Venezuela stated: "Intolerance is the inability to put oneself in the place of another. When we learn tolerance, we are free. Books are idea threads which connect us to others."

Hazel Rochman (1993), author of *Against Borders; Promoting Books for a Multicultural World* and native of South Africa, writes:

> Apartheid has tried to make us bury our books. The Inquisition and the Nazis burned books. Slaves in the United States were forbidden to read books. From Latin America to Eastern Europe, they've trashed books. But the stories are still here. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye, whose father came from Palestine and whose mother came from St. Louis, says that "reading cracked the universe wide open' for her. "Reading gave us voices of friends speaking from everywhere."
>
> I believe that the best books can make a difference in building community. They can break down borders. And the way that they do that is not with role models and recipes, not with noble messages about the human family, but with enthralling stories that make us imagine the lives of others. A good story lets you know people as individuals in all their particularity and conflict; and once you see someone as a person-their meanness and their courage then you've reached beyond stereotype. Multiculturalism means across cultures, against borders; multiculturalism doesn't mean only people of color; multiculturalism isn't a special subject of an anthology or a separate area of a library, or a special month of the year...It's part of everything we do. It's us.

## Challenges

We have two challenges before us: book selection and attitude changing. How can we help get the best books for building community? One way is by encouraging book translations as a two-way street: getting the best of American books into other languages and getting the best books from other cultures translated and circulated in America and Canada. Another way is to deliberately work at changing intolerant attitudes among us.

### Book Translations

Kyoko Matsuoka (1994) told the Congress that quality translations are important to Japanese children. They offer more adventure, fantasy, humor, courage, ingenuity, and a sense of justice than Japanese books. In turn, Japanese books offer beautiful images, an intimacy, and a sense of tolerance and strength. Matsuoka stated that children do not notice so much the outward differences, but go straight to the core. They discover what is alike or what moves them.

I would like to see more translated books from South America. The jury of the Hans Christian Andersen Awards noted a highly recommended author, Maria Elena Walsh from Argentina. Eva Glistrup (1994), the jury chair from Denmark, said ...[Maria Walsh] is the symbol of the quest for truth; she leads readers to a new way of seeing things. The jury would like to call attention to her work, so that her work can be translated all over the world.

As educators and readers, we can influence Western publishers to promote quality literature in South America and in Eastern Europe.

In the November 1994 *Reading Teacher*, Patricia Bloem, a doctoral student at Kent State University wrote "Surviving Stalin to be done in by Disney?

Children's literature in Slovakia." Following a year spent in Bratislava where her children attended school, Patricia Bloem noted that teachers in Slovakia were quick to recognize the inferior quality of American commercial publications, which were extremely popular with the Slovakian children. Countries other than the United States are exporting quality children's literature and hopefully American publishers will join them and also make quality Slovak books available in the West.

Changing Attitudes

How do we change attitudes? Let me try to begin by telling stories of what people in other countries are doing.

I met Peter and Isobel Randall, publishers of children's books in South Africa. Isobel is a teacher in primary school and Peter teaches in a university in Johannasburg. He was harassed, jailed, fined, and his books were mutilated under apartheid because he refused to stop publishing books written by black authors, or books that had both white and black characters in the same book. They are confident that the worst is over but they still cannot make a living in publishing so both hold two jobs. He is concerned now that political correctness may place another kind of restriction on truth in books. For example, he published a book with a black boy as main character who wanted a bicycle and took jobs to earn money. This book was translated in America, but the boy was changed to a girl and the way of making money was changed from working for a white lady to raising and selling vegetables.

I met Epp Eelmaa, from the Government Education office in Estonia, who was given the job of providing tradebooks for all the school children in the country. Estonia is the least populous republic in the Baltics and their country has been bereft of books since the annexation to the Soviet Union in

the 40s. She has turned primarily to Finland for help with book selection. The Nordic corporation of Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland produced an exhibit, The Children of the North, which has toured Europe and which she hopes to get in her country. The Estonian national section of IBBY is very active, sponsoring many activities such as book sales, an International Children's Book Day, prizes for the best Estonian text chosen by the school children, seminars, and competitions for children writing and illustrating books.

I met Jacqueline Kergueno from Paris. Jacqueline had been a special education teacher. Children's magazines are popular in Europe and she used them with her special classes. She was rewriting the text because her children could not read them. One day, after receiving another magazine that her children could not read, she wrote to Bayard Press, the Paris publisher, "See how I have to change the text so that my students can read it!" She received a call from the company, offering her a job. Now, seventeen years later, as director of publications, she travels to the seventeen countries where the many different magazines appear in several different languages. She makes sure that as well as being readable, the journals reflect the needs and the culture of the local readers. Please come up after the session to view the journals that are on display here.

At one session at IBBY, a presenter from the United States was explaining a classroom unit on multicultural understanding. Now the audience was a group of community literary leaders, publishers, authors, artists--no, or very few, teachers. I sensed an air of incredulity and unrest in the audience. Finally, a lady in the front row asked, "Did you say four weeks?" Others joined in with a variety of comments. As the speaker went on, the lady

in the front row interrupted again, in a jovial fashion, and turned to ask another person from her country to agree that it took a long time to gain understanding.

Then she turned so everyone could see her and said, "Look at me. I'm a Palestinian. Do I look like a terrorist? Now, are you afraid of me? And that lady over there is my friend, an Israeli. It's all in your head. and in your heart. It takes time to get people to change their ideas."

Let each of us accept the challenge to find our own way to promote sensitivity and understanding of all the cultures in the world. How do we do it? By finding opportunities in our own school or career position, recognizing that it takes time but that it can be done. I offer the challenge especially to teacher educators to promote multicultural sensitivity in future teachers who, in turn, influence future generations.

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